

Maine Project Against Bullying
Executive Summary: A Survey of Bullying Behavior Among Maine Third Graders
January 2000

Project Description

For the past three years the Maine Project Against Bullying (MPAB) has been researching the issue of bullying and identifying resources and strategies which can be applied in Maine schools to alleviate the problem. MPAB spent much of the first year reviewing research and current materials on bullying. This literature review yielded a wealth of evidence which supports early intervention and prevention efforts. The second year was focused on establishing baseline data about bullying in Maine. The MPAB completed a survey on bullying of third graders in Maine elementary schools during February 1999. One hundred twenty-seven schools returned the survey providing a sample of 4496 subjects, 28% of all third grade students in Maine.

The purpose of this survey was to help schools make a brief assessment about the following:

- A. The nature and extent to which bullying is occurring in a school;
- B. How children have reacted to bullying at school and what have been the consequences for their feelings of safety and well being;
- C. Whether they have informed others and to what outcomes;
- D. Students' perceptions of their own aggressive behaviors at school;
- E. Gender differences regarding all of the above.

The survey described bullying behavior in the following ways: (1) teased in a mean way, (2) called hurtful names, (3) left out of things on purpose, (4) threatened, (5) hit, kicked, or pushed.

Consultative services, data collection and data entry were provided by staff of the Maine School Linked/School Based Mental Health Services Project of the State Department of Human Services and the Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service, Institute for Public Sector Innovation. Data analysis and additional consultation was provided by research staff of the Center for Educational Policy, Applied Research and Evaluation, College of Education & Human Development, at the University of Southern Maine.

A complete copy of the data analysis (Appendix 1) and the survey (Appendix 2) are attached.

The third year of the project focused on raising public awareness of the issue and providing free training for schools that participated in the survey.

Summary of Findings

The following is a summary of important information revealed by an analysis of the data collected through this survey.

A. The nature and extent to which bullying is occurring in a school (see table 5 Appendix 1):

In response to this question 22.6% of third graders surveyed said they were threatened, 40.7% were teased in a mean way, 40% were called hurtful names, 34.3% were left out of things on purpose, and 37.5% were hit, kicked, or pushed everyday, once or twice a week or month.

B. How children have reacted to bullying at school and what have been the consequences for their feelings of safety and well-being (see tables 13 and 1 Appendix 1):

Of surveyed students confronted with bullying 91.3% reported taking some action in response. Most children (44.6%) tell an adult, 34.2% tell the bully to stop, 32% get away from the bully.

Although 44.3% of students surveyed said they felt “very happy and good school, 19.4% percent indicated feeling “so-so”. Also, “sometimes sad and unhappy”, and “very sad and unhappy” responses totaled 6.3% (287 students).

C. Whether they have informed others and to what outcomes (see table 15 Appendix 1):

Bullied students reported that when they told someone about the bullying, 48.2% said “it got better”, while 15.3% said “it got worse”, and 21.7% said “nothing happened”. It should be noted that reported in the research that victims sometimes do not report bullying for fear of retaliation from the bully.

D. Students’ perceptions of their own aggressive behaviors at school (see tables 8 and 9 Appendix 1):

Of the third graders surveyed 13.8 - 17.7% reported that they participate in the identified bullying behaviors everyday, once or twice a week or month. Further analysis also showed that almost twice as many boys (19.7%) as girls (9.2%) reported that they frequently bully other children.

E. Gender differences regarding all of the above (see tables 10 and 11 Appendix 1):

From table 11, we can see a difference between genders when children named the perpetrator(s). A higher percentage of boys (30.1%) than girls (18.9%) reported being bullied by a boy, while a higher percentage of girls (13.2%) than boys (4.8%) reported being bullied by a girl. Similarly, a higher percentage of boys (24.7%) than girls (15.0%) reported a boy tried to hurt them, while a higher percentage of girls (5.9%) than boys (3.2%) reported a girl tried to hurt them. Generally speaking, when children reported about those responsible for milder as well as more serious bullying acts (table 10), they most often said (40.6%) that “a boy” had committed the offense.

Discussion

The frequency of bullying and inappropriate aggressive behaviors as demonstrated in this survey of Maine third graders is cause for concern. Once bullying is established as a behavioral pattern it tends to persist through school years and may last well into adulthood (Olweus 1993a, Walker 1993). We have a sample of third graders in which 22.6-40.7% of respondents say they are experiencing bullying with relative frequency (table 5 Appendix 1). Children’s self esteem suffers greatly when they are bullied. “Victimization is associated with poor physical, social and psychological well-being in primary

school children” (Slee 1994). The presence of bullying in a school indicates that the level of pro-social behavior and respect for oneself and others is lacking. These survey results show that for 37% of victims who seek help against a bully the situation continues as it is, or worsens. This perceived lack of assistance at school for victimized students gives the implicit message that these behaviors are acceptable. This is unacceptable and may have devastating results on the victims’ feelings of self worth

Of the third graders surveyed 13.8 - 17.7% reported that they participate in the identified bullying behaviors everyday, once or twice a week or month. Olweus (1993a) found that there was a stability of bully/victim problems over time. That is, children who bully and children who are victimized tend to perpetuate these roles throughout their school years. It is these students that educators must help as early as possible in their school careers in order to have a chance of changing these emerging harmful patterns of behavior. Harassing student behavior does not spontaneously appear in middle school. It has its origins in preschool. The current research regarding antisocial behavior makes clear that early intervention in home, school, and community are the best hope we have of diverting children from these behaviors.

It should be noted that 18.9% of surveyed girls report being bullied by a boy and 15.0% of girls report that a boy tried to hurt them. Given the stability of bully and victim roles over time (Olweus 1993a) these numbers should cause concern about the middle, junior and senior high school years for these students.

Most students are neither bully nor victim. They are however witnesses to the bullying that takes place around them. Children’s exposure to violence and maltreatment (including verbal abuse) of others is significantly associated with increased depression, anxiety, anger, post-traumatic stress, alcohol use and low grades (Eron 1987). Given the frequency of bullying as reported in this survey, it is important to acknowledge the effects of bullying on bystanders and the potential effects on school climate.

Recommendations

Public schools do not intentionally teach violence or promote aggressive behavior in children. School violence is a community issue. Research shows that communities with higher rates of violence (domestic violence, assaults, etc.) report higher frequencies of “school violence”. If we accept the premise that schools are a reflection of their communities then we must realize that schools alone can not resolve the bullying issue. We need to promote the idea that there are multiple stakeholders involved in this issue and we are all in this together. The current research predicts a bleak future for children who bully and for their victims unless there are corrective actions taken by those in a position to influence their lives. We must always remember that this work is targeted at specific behaviors not specific individuals. We must avoid labeling a child as a bully or victim.

The following recommendations are suggested by the members of the Maine Project Against Bullying as action steps toward diminishing the effects of bullying behavior in Maine schools and communities. They are specific to each stakeholder group.

Department of Education:

- DOE can identify programs and resources which provide information and training about bullying prevention and provide access for schools to these resources.
- DOE can provide assistance to schools in developing discipline policies consistent with violence prevention guidelines issued by the Federal DOE.

- DOE can collaborate with the Maine Superintendents' Association, the Maine Principals' Association and the Maine School Counselors' Association in promoting adoption of research-based bullying prevention programs such as the one from the Center for Violence Prevention: Blueprints for Violence Prevention in Colorado.

Schools:

- Adult behavior is crucial to the success of any anti-bullying initiative (Olweus 1993a). All adults in school must become aware of the extent of the bully/victim problems in their own school and community. These adults must then become engaged in a focused and sustained effort to change the situation. There exist a number of comprehensive bullying prevention programs which can help schools restructure the existing school environment to reduce opportunities and rewards for bullying behavior. These programs focus on creating a school climate of trust, respect, acceptance and caring. Statewide promotion of proven anti-bullying programs which are supported with staff training and continuing assistance in implementation would be a powerful intervention toward diminishing the effects of bullying behavior in Maine schools.
- Schools can utilize existing team resources such as Student Assistance Teams, Civil Rights Teams, Peer Mediation Teams or Safe School Teams to supervise implementation of an approved bullying prevention program.
- Individual schools can assess the problem in their own school and create awareness and involvement activities for adults.
- Schools can provide training and information to teachers and parents on the issue of bullying at school.
- Schools, with parent and student involvement, can develop clear behavioral guidelines which are consistently enforced.

School Counselors:

- School counselors can help create positive behavioral supports in their schools for students displaying pro-social behaviors.
- School counselors can advocate for implementation of bullying prevention curriculum.
- School counselors can work with students who bully and victimized students individually and in small groups. These students need assistance if they are to become productive citizens. Early identification of, and appropriate intervention for, these students would go a long way toward helping them change these destructive patterns of behavior.
- School counselors can create groups with a common, empathizing theme such as children of divorce, and make sure to mix the popular students with the less popular students in the same group to empathize with one another.

Teachers:

- The message that, "Bullying is not acceptable in our school/class and we will see to it that it comes to an end", must be communicated in every school in Maine. Teachers can establish and enforce specific rules against bullying, as well as hold regular classroom meetings with students to discuss bullying and related behavioral issues.

in their school.

- Teachers can learn more effective strategies for dealing with bullying.
- Teachers can model compassion for all students.

Students:

- At the center of any approach to bullying prevention are those individuals most directly affected by and responsible for bully/victim situations - the students in the school. Most students are neither bully nor victim. They are however witnesses to the bullying that takes place around them. Students can promote a positive school climate by discouraging bullying behavior among their peers, promoting inclusion of all others in their activities and seeking to foster acceptance of differences.
- Maine's students need to be educated about bullying and what one can do if one is the victim of a bully and what one can do if one sees another student being bullied. To stop bullying we need to empower the caring majority of students.

Parents:

- Parents can listen to their children. Encourage children to talk about events at school, the walk or ride to and from school and how they are being treated by their peers so they can identify problems.
- Parents can take children's complaints of bullying seriously. Children are often afraid to tell anyone that they have been bullied.
- Parents can be on the lookout for signs that their child is being bullied such as a drop in grades, torn clothes, or needing extra money or supplies.
- Parents can tell the school or organization immediately if they think their child is being bullied.
- Parents can work with other adults in their neighborhood to ensure that the children in their neighborhood are closely supervised on their way to and from school.
- Parents can praise children's kindness toward others and teach tolerance of others.
- Parents can monitor what their child watches on TV as well as the content of their video games.

Communities:

- Community resources need to be made available to the families of children who bully in order to help them develop a home environment characterized by warmth, positive interest, and involvement by adults.
- Schools, homes and communities need to be places where there are firm limits to unacceptable behavior, where non-hostile, non-physical negative consequences are consistently applied in cases of violations of rules and other unacceptable behaviors, and where adults act as authorities and positive role models. Access to school-based mental health services would be very beneficial to the families of children who bully.
- Communities need to strive to provide resources to meet all of the diverse needs of Maine youth.

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